

# AKBAR AND HIS CHEETAHS

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A few centuries ago cheetahs roamed from the Indian subcontinent to the shores of the Red sea and throughout much of Africa. As fleet of foot as they are, though, they couldn't outrun the long reach of humanity. To-day the Asiatic cheetah, the elegant subspecies that once graced the royal courts of India, Persia, and Arabia, is all about extinct.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest reference to the cheetah in medieval Indian records appears in *Taj-al-Maasir*, which records the word *yuz* (cheetah) in two of its passages.<sup>2</sup> There are also references regarding cheetah in *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri*, *Tarikh-i- Firoz Shahi*, *Akbarnama*, *Ain-i- Akbari*, *Tuzuk-i- Jahangiri*, *Iqbalnama-i- Jahangiri*, *Maasir-i- Jahangiri*, *Mirat-i- Ahmadi*, *Majalis-i- Jahangiri*<sup>3</sup> and in traveller's accounts. Babur in his memoir mentioned the fauna of Hindustan. But it is surprising note that there is no mention of Cheetah in his memoirs. No reference to Cheetah is forthcoming from Humayun's time. However, Cheetah with Humayun appears in a painting in the *Akbarnama* manuscript prepared in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, where Humayun and Shah Thamasb are shown hunting near Takht-i-Sulaiman and Hauz-i-Sulaiman in Persia and a cheetah is clearly visible. The working by Ganga Sen and Narsingh.<sup>4</sup>

The cheetah's habitat lies not in thick tree forests, but in rocky tracts or low rugged hills bordering on wastelands and land with tall grass where he could find his prey.<sup>5</sup> The cheetahs select three places, in one part of the country they hunt; in another part they rest and sleep; and in third place they play and amuse themselves. They mostly sleep on the top of a hill under shade of a tree.<sup>6</sup>

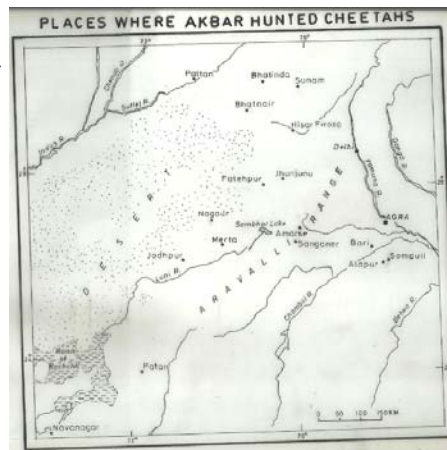
Names of the Cheetah in various languages in the Indian subcontinent given below bear testimony to their presence all over the Indian subcontinent

Language	Cheetah
Arabic	<i>Fahd</i>
Bengali	<i>Cheetah-bagh, Tendua- bagh</i>
Gujarati	<i>Cheetah</i>
Hindi	<i>Cheetah</i>
Kannada	<i>Chircha, Sivungi</i>
Marathi	<i>Cheetah</i>
Persian	<i>Yuz</i>
Rajasthani	<i>Cheetah</i>
Sanskrit	<i>Chitraka</i>
Tamil	<i>Sivingi</i>
Telugu	<i>Chita-pauli</i>

The cheetahs are the fastest land animals in the world. They can run up to 70 miles (113 km) per hour.<sup>7</sup> Though often confused with the leopard, there are major differences between them. The cheetahs have dark lines near their eyes. The lines stretch to the sides of the mouth, and help cheetahs to see in the bright sun. The leopards are Nocturnal animal that hunt at night, so leopards have huge eyes that help to see in dark. The leopard's spots are grouped into rose shape and the cheetahs spots are shaped like ovals. The cheetahs head is small as compare to leopards.<sup>8</sup> The unique difference between the leopard<sup>9</sup> and the cheetah was that the latter could be trusted never to attack man, and also not be agitated by crowds in towns or processions.<sup>10</sup> But Mughals have knowledge to differentiate between leopards and cheetahs on the basis of their physical characteristic, habitats. The Mughals used the word 'yuz' or cheetah (in Persian) for "hunting-leopard" and 'Palang' for leopard.<sup>11</sup>

In 1555, it was the first time that Akbar showed interest in hunting with cheetah (hunting-leopard), and the first place where he saw the sport. Wali Beg the father of Khan-i Jahan presented as *peshkash* a cheetah which had come into his hands from the Afghans at the battle of *Maciwara* and was named Fatehbaz (the gamester victory). The keeper of this cheetah called *Dundu* and on account of his good qualities, he was awarded the title of *Fateh Khan*.<sup>12</sup>

Cheetahs were found in West Punjab in the Lakhi jungle on the northern bank of the Sutlej.<sup>13</sup> The Localities where cheetahs were caught are well documented in Mughal accounts. Akbar generally hunt cheetah thirty or forty *kos* from Agra, especially in the district of Bari, Simawali, Alapur, Sunam, Bhatinda, Bhatnir, Patan in Punjab, Fathpur, Jhinjhanu, Nagor, Mirath, Jodhpur, Jaisalmir, Amrasarnayin,<sup>14</sup> and several other more remote spots have been selected as *shikargah* (hunting ground).<sup>15</sup>



Akbar generally caught cheetah using three different methods. Firstly, he made a pit only two or three *gaz* deep and constructed a peculiar trapdoor, which closed on the cheetah, as he fell into the hole.

The animal was never hurt. Sometimes more than one went into the trap. On one occasion no less than seven cheetahs were caught. At the time of their heat, which takes place in winter, a female cheetah had been walking about on the field, and six male cheetahs were after her. Accidentally she fell into a pit, and her male companions, unwilling to let her off, dropped in one after the other.<sup>16</sup>

Earlier the hunters used to make deep holes and cover them with grass. These pits were called '*odi*'. The cheetah on coming near them, fell down to the bottom; but they often broken their feet or legs, or managed by jumping to get out again. In this system only one cheetah was caught in each pit.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly cheetahs were caught by tiring them out. Thirdly, they were caught by hanging a nose down from tree. When the animals come to scratch itself, it got entangled in it.<sup>18</sup>

Akbar also invented a method of hunting deer called *chatrmandal*. The hunters lay in ambush near a place frequented by deer, and commenced the chase from this place as if it was a *qamargha* hunt. The cheetah is then let off in all directions, and many deer are thus caught.<sup>19</sup>

As for the training of the cheetahs is concerned, in former times people managed to train a newly caught cheetah for the chase in the space of three months, or if they exerted themselves, in two months. But Akbar trained them in the short space of eighteen days. Akbar used to take it upon himself to keep and train cheetahs, astonishing the most experienced by his success.<sup>20</sup> Before Akbar a cheetah would not kill more than three antelope in one and the same chase, but now after training he would hunt as many as twelve.<sup>21</sup> Abu'l Fazl inform us that in former times cheetahs were kept blindfolded, but at the court of Akbar, because of improve training, it was no longer necessary to do so. Once, from the kindness shown by Akbar, an antelope made friendship with a cheetah. They lived together and enjoyed each other's company. The most remarkable thing was this, that the cheetah when let off against other antelope, would pounce upon them as any other cheetah.<sup>22</sup> At Akbar's establishment there were two hundred keepers in charge of the *khasa* cheetahs.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes three or four men were appointed to train and look after a cheetah. The wages of the keepers vary from Rs 30 to Rs 5 per *ensem*. Grandees of the court also were appointed as superintend over the keepers of each cheetah. Each cheetah had a name which indicates some of his qualities.<sup>24</sup> Every ten cheetahs form a *Misl* or *Taraf* (set); they are also divided according to their rank as follows. One thousand cheetahs were kept in Akbar's park.<sup>25</sup> The three first sets were *khasa*; they were kept at court together with two

other sets and for their conveyance two *mihaffa*<sup>26</sup> (litters) are hung over the back of an elephant, one *mihaffa* on each side and on each *mihaffa* a cheetah sat, looking out for prey. Sometimes cheetah was carried by men in doolies. The best cheetah in the court of Akbar was supposed to be Samand Manik; carried on a *chau-dol* and proceeded with much pomp. Its servants fully equipped run at its side and the *naqqara* (a large drum) was beaten in front and sometimes he is carried by two men on horseback. A tame, trained cheetah had the *dooly* carried by three men, others by two.<sup>27</sup>

Cheetahs were divided in eight categories and were given meat accordingly.

Classes of Cheetah	Quantity in <i>Seer</i> <sup>28</sup>	Quantity in kg
First class	5 <i>seer</i>	04kg 665g
Second class	4 ½ <i>seer</i>	04kg 119g
Third class	4 <i>seer</i>	03kg 732g
Fourth class	3 ¾ <i>seer</i>	03kg 499g
Fifth class	3 ½ <i>seer</i>	3kg 265g
Sixth class	3 ¼ <i>seer</i>	3kg 32g
Seventh class	3 <i>seer</i>	2kg 799g
Eight class	2 ¾ <i>seer</i>	2kg 566g

Table 1: Source, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. i

On 24<sup>th</sup> November 1560 Akbar march from the Punjab to Agra. On the way at Hisar Firuza the huntsmen represented that there were in the neighbourhood jungles containing *yuz*, (cheetah).<sup>29</sup> In a short time all the preparation were made, and sundry pits (*odi*) were dug and several heads of cheetah were caught there and then.

In 1562, Akbar was at the village of Sangani<sup>30</sup> it was reported that a *cheetaban*, (cheetah keeper) appropriated a pair of shoes belonging to another man. The news reached the emperor and after investigation an order was issued for cutting of his feet.<sup>31</sup>

Akbar's joy increased when he engaged in hunting of cheetahs,<sup>32</sup> he had traps made for catching them. The custom was that when news was brought of a cheetah having fallen into a trap,<sup>33</sup> he immediately mounted a swift horse and went off to the spot. By proper methods the cheetah was brought out from the hole and made over to the skilful keepers. On one occasion news was brought that a powerful cheetah had fallen into a hole in the neighbourhood of Gwalior, when he came to the hole he himself tied the cheetah and took it out.<sup>34</sup>

On 16<sup>th</sup> April 1571, the emperor was at Pakpattan. One day the huntsmen reported that there were several cheetahs, and Akbar went in quest of them, on that day six cheetahs were caught in a *kheda*, and

among them was Madan Kali which in time became the head of the Akbar's cheetahs<sup>35</sup>.

During his first expedition to Gujarat in 1572, while passing through Rajasthan, Akbar encamped at Sanganir for hunt. Akbar went off himself to hunt with some special attendants. They loosed a *cheetah-i-khasa* (special cheetah) called Chitranjan at a deer. Suddenly there appeared in front of them a ravine which was twenty-five yards abroad. The deer leapt into the air to the height of a spear and a half and conveyed itself across. The cheetah in its eagerness took the same course, cleared the ravine and seized the deer. On beholding this astonishing occurrence the spectators raised a cry of amazement and there was great rejoicing. The emperor raised the rank of that cheetah and made him chief of cheetahs. He also ordered that as a special honour, a drum should be beaten in front of that cheetah.<sup>36</sup>

In the world of warfare and good and bad omens, the cheetahs too had a place and at least one instance has been recorded when Akbar, chasing Ibrahim Hussain in 1573, saw a good omen in successful hunt. "One of the mysterious indications, which caused joy to Akbar, comrades was that when it became morning.....a deer appeared, it passed into the mind of Akbar that if he caught this deer it would be sign of victory so a cheetah was slipped, and immediately the deer was captured. When it became known to Akbar's followers, their hearts were strengthened a thousand fold and they addressed themselves to the march".<sup>37</sup>

In 1574, Akbar was on expedition in Bihar. At Lodipur during crossing Ganges one of the boats which were carrying cheetah sank, and of the imperial cheetahs Daulat Khan and Dilrang were drowned.<sup>38</sup>

In 1608, when Jahangir was at Ajmir, Raja Bir Singh Deo brought a *yuz-i-safed* (white cheetah) to show him, before this he had never seen a white cheetah.<sup>39</sup> Raja Bir Singh Deo was from Orchha in Central India and this area must have had a large cheetah population because of the presence of black-buck, cheetah's main prey. British sportsmen and naturalist reported seeing groups of these animals there during mutiny.<sup>40</sup> During Jahangir times cheetahs were caught from Mughal Hunting grounds some 90 km north-west of Orchha and elsewhere in Central India.<sup>41</sup>

Jahangir also informs us regarding breeding of the cheetah. He recorded that "It is a fact that the hunting cheetahs do not pair in places other than their habitats. My revered father once collected together 1,000 cheetahs. He was very eager that they should pair, but this is no way come off. Several times male and female cheetahs were brought together unchained in the gardens. But there too they did not pair.

Recently it happened that a male slipped off its collar, approached a female and paired with it. After two and a half months three cubs were born and they grew up.”<sup>42</sup> This is the only known instance of cheetahs breeding in captivity anywhere until the second half of this century, the Philadelphia Zoo, U.S.A. bred African Cheetahs in 1956.<sup>43</sup> Unlike other cats it did not breed easily in captivity, the animal was prolific enough breeder in its natural habitat to have survived for so long.<sup>44</sup>

From the memoirs of Jahangir we know that when he was at Rumbas (Gujarat) in 1611, he used cheetahs to hunt down many antelopes.<sup>45</sup> When Jahangir was at Ajmer in 1616, he killed a cheetah.<sup>46</sup> At Palampur in 1619 Jahangir hunted with cheetahs.<sup>47</sup>

Asok Kumar Das examined, eighty-nine Mughal Paintings in which cheetahs were shown. In sixty-seven of these, the tip of the cheetah's tail was visible. It was found that it was black in all cases, thus throwing up the single largest body of evidence known to scientific enquiry showing a morphological difference between cheetahs of India and those from Africa. Indian cheetahs' tails usually had black or predominantly black tips. Cheetahs from Africa, on the other hand, generally have white-tipped tails. As the Indian cheetah has become extinct and written records are scanty, the paintings are the only source of evidence.<sup>48</sup> The cheetah is depicted in a number of Mughal paintings. In a double page painting, dated 1567 A.D. of which the right page was painted by Sarwan and the left by Mansur, black-buck and deer (cheetah's prey) shown with cheetah (Fig.1).<sup>49</sup> In another painting by Basawan dated, 1575-80<sup>50</sup> family of cheetahs is depicted with their natural habitats (Fig.2).<sup>51</sup> One of the *Akbarnama* painting by Anant in which Akbar is shown receiving young Abdur Rahim after the death of his father, depicts cheetahs and horses which were brought daily for inspection in the court (Fig.3).<sup>52</sup> In a painting by Daulat, dated, 1604 episode of cheetah trapping from the pits depicted supervised by Akbar (Fig.4).<sup>53</sup> Naturalistically rendered flowers, plants and animals depicted in a lively, energetic form are the hallmark of carpet weaving under the Mughals.<sup>54</sup> Thus the cheetah's were also depicted on carpets court (Fig.5).<sup>55</sup> A calligraphical work by Mir Ali dated, 1540 shows a black-buck being attacked by a cheetah (Fig.6).<sup>56</sup> From the sixteenth century, black-buck were the primary quarry of the Mughal emperor's hunting cheetahs.<sup>57</sup>

The cheetah became extinct in Indian subcontinent in the 1950s, when the Maharaja of Korwai (Madhya Pradesh) state shot three cheetahs in 1948.<sup>58</sup>

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Roff Smith, 'Cheetahs on the Edge', *Journal of the National Geographic Society*, vol.22. no.5, 2012, p.112





Fig.1: Hunting near Lahore in 1567  
(Source: Pratapaditya Pal, *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, Plate No.7)



Fig.2: Family of Cheetah's  
(Source: Pratapaditya Pal, *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, plate no.2)



Fig.3: Akbar receiving young Abdur Rahim after the death of Bairam Khan  
(Source: Geeti Sen, *Paintings from the Akbarnama: A Visual Chronicle of Mughal India*, plate No.10)



Fig.4: Akbar engaged in trapping a Cheetah  
(Source: Pratapaditya Pal, *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, Plate No.5)



Fig.5: Fragment of an animal carpet  
(Source: Michael Brand & al., *Akbar's India: Art from the Mughal City of Victory*, Plate No.71)

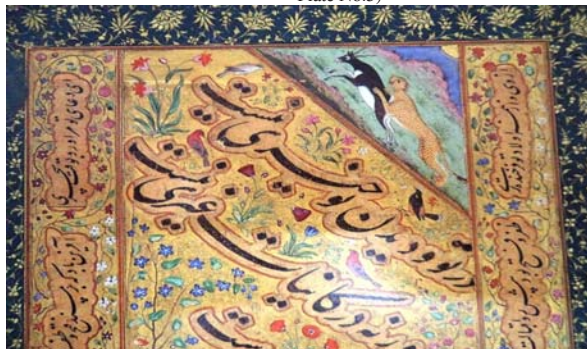


Fig.6: Calligraphic folio shows a black buck attacked by a Cheetah  
(Source: S.C. Welch, et al., *The Emperors Album*, Plate No.39)

2. Divyabhanusinh, *The End of a Trail: The Cheetah in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Third edition, 2006, p.31
3. Abdul Satta ibn-i-Qasim Lahori, '*Majalis-i-Jahangiri*', edited by Arif Naushahi and Moeen Nizami, Tehran, 2006, p.180-81
4. A. K. Das, *pers.comm.*, 1993, British Library manuscript .no.103. Cf. *The End of a Trail*, p.38
5. Shireen Moosvi, *People, Taxation, and Trade in Mughal India*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.97
6. Abu'l Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol.i, ed., Syed Ahmad Khan, Sir Syed Academy, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 2005, p.165
7. Buffy Silverman, *Can you tell a Cheetah from a leopard?*, Learner Publication Company, U.S.A., 2012, p.29
8. Ibid. p.12, 16, 18, 20 and 29.
9. Leopard attack on men, See *The Hindu*, New Delhi Edition, dated, 16, November 2012, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2013, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2013, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013
10. *The End of a Trail*, p.2.
11. *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. i, p.165. See Divyabhanusinh, 'Records of Two Unique Observations of the Indian Cheetah in *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*', *JBNHS*, Vol. 84, 1987, p.269.
12. Abu'l Fazl. *Akbarnama*, vol.i, ed., Maulvi Agha Ahmad and Maulvi Abdur Raheem, The Asiatic society, Calcuta, 1877, pp.347
13. Shireen Moosvi, *People, Taxation, and Trade in Mughal India*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp.97-98
14. *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol.i, p.166, See Irfan Habib, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire*, Oxford University Press, 1982 sheet 4B, 6B, 7B and 8B. See *People, Taxation, and Trade in Mughal India*, p.98
15. Abu'l Fazl, *Akbarnama*, vol.,ii, ed, Maulvi Abdur Raheem, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1879 pp.363 and 371.
16. *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol.i, pp.165-66.
17. Ibid., p.166.
18. Ibid., p.166.
19. Ibid., p.168.
20. Ibid., p.166.
21. Ibid., p.168. See *The End of a Trail*, p.47
22. *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. I, pp.166, 167 and 168, See *The End of a Trail: The Cheetah in India*, p.46.
23. Ibid., p.166.
24. Ibid., p.167. See, *Akbarnama*, vol., iii, ed., Maulvi Abdur Raheem, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1886 p.94.
25. *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol.i, p.167. See Shireen Moosvi, 'Man and Nature in Mughal Era' 54<sup>th</sup> session *Indian History Congress* Symposia paper:5, Mysore, 1993, p.23.
26. Mihaffa (litters) is also put on camels, horses and cattle.
27. *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol.I, p.167.
28. 01 seer equal to 933.12 grm.
29. *Akbarnama*, vol., ii, p.186. See *People, Taxation, and Trade in Mughal*, p.93
30. A town in Jaipur, seven miles south-west of the capital.
31. *Akbarnamae*, vol.ii, p.156.



32. Ibid., p.88.
33. Akbar engaged trapping cheetah in a painting preserve in Chester Beatty Library, Dublin
34. *The Akbarnama*, vol.,ii p.349. See Pratapaditya Pal, *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, Plate v, p.92.
35. Ibid., p.363.
36. *Akbarnama*, vol.,ii, p.371. See Shireen Moosvi, *Episodes in the life of Akbar Contemporary Records and Reminiscences*, NBT ,New Delhi, 1994, p.39. See S.P. Verma, ed., *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, Marg Publication, Mumbai, 1999, p.98.
37. *Akbarnama*, Vol.iii, p.13.
38. *Akbarnama*, vol.iii, p.94.
39. Jahangir, *Tuzuk-I –Jahangiri*, ed.,Sir Syed Ahmad, Sir Syed Academy, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 2007, p.66.
40. 'Records of Two Unique Observations of the Indian Cheetah in *Tuzuk-i- Jahangiri*, 'JBNHS, Vol. 84, 1987, p. 269.
41. Ibid, p. 270. See Irfan Habib, sheet 8B. See also *People, Taxation, and Trade in Mughal* ,p.96.
42. Mutamad Khan, *Iqbalnama-i- Jahangiri*,ed., Maulvi Abdul Hai and Maulvi Ahmad Ali, College Press, Calcutta,1865, p.70. See Jahangir, *Tuzuk-I – Jahangiri*, ed, Syed Ahmad, Sir Syed Academy, A.M.U. Aligarh, 2007 p.117.
43. Randall L .Eaton, *The cheetah: The Biology, Ecology and Behaviour of an Endangered species*, Florida,USA, 1982,P.33. See 'Records of Two Unique Observations of the Indian Cheetah in *Tuzuk-i- Jahangiri*' p.269.
44. *The End of a Trail*, p.2.
45. *Tuzuk-I- Jahangiri*, p.92 , 99 and 205.
46. Ibid., pp.168 and 182.
47. Ibid., p.281.
48. S.P. Verma, ed., *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, Marg Publication, Mumbai, 1999, p.107.
49. *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, plate no.7, preserve in Victoria Albert Museum.
50. *The End of a Trail*, mentioned 1570, p.51.
51. *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, plate no.2. See Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowry, *Akbar's India : Art from the Mughal City of Victory* , Sotheby Publications London, plate no.46.
52. Geeti Sen, *Paintings from the Akbarnama: A visual chronicle of Mughal India*, Rupa & Co, New Delhi, 1984, plate no.10.
53. *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, plate no.5. preserve in Chester Beatty Library Dublin.
54. *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, p.133
55. *Akbar's India : Art from the Mughal City of Victory* , plate 71 See *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, p. 134,136 and 138.
56. S.C. Welch, et al., *The Emperors Album*, New York, 1987, plate no.39
57. *The End of a Trail*, p.49 See Julie E Hughes, *Animal Kingdoms Hunting, the Environment, and Power in the Indian Princely States*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2013, p.151.
58. The Encyclopaedia of *Journal of Bombay Natural History Society*, vol,100, Bombay 2003,p.103. See *Man and Environment*,p.138.